WORLD SUMMIT FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

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Attacking Poverty

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UNITED NATIONS

Disasters: Threat to Social Development

Two steps forward, one step back: progress in social development will be eroded if countries do not take natural disasters into account in their development planning. This was one of the key messages emerging from the recent UN-sponsored World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction , in Yokohama, Japan, from 23 to 27 May 1994.

Situation

♦ Damage inflicted by disasters kill one million people each decade and leave millions more homeless.

♦ Economic damages from natural disasters has tripled in the last thirty years. In the 1960s, disasters cost the world an estimated $40 billion; in the 1970s, the cost was $70 billion; by the 1980s, it had risen to $120 billion.

♦ Before 1987, there was only one disaster the cost of which exceeded $1 billion in insured losses. Since 1987, however, thirteen additional such disasters have occurred.

Billion-dollar losses from natural disasters 1983-1994

Event/place/year	Economic losses in US$bn
Hurricane "Alicia" (USA, 1983)	1.65
Winter storm "Herta" (Europe, 1990)	1.90
Forest fire (USA, 1991)	2.00
Winter storm "Wiebke" (Europe, 1990)	2.25
Hurricane "Iniki" (Hawaii, 1992)	3.00
Winter storm "Vivian" (Europe, 1990)	3.25
Winter gale (Western Europe, 1987)	3.70
Blizzard (USA, 1993)	5.00
Typhoon "Mireille" (Japan, 1991)	6.00
Winter storm "Daria" (Europe, 1990)	6.80
Hurricane "Hugo" (Caribbean, USA, 1989)	9.00
Floods (USA, 1993)	12.00
Earthquake (USA, 1994)	30.00
Hurricane "Andrew" (USA, 1991)	30.00

Source: From Disaster Management to Sustainable Development: How the Public Sector, Private Sector and Voluntary Organizations Can Work Together, WHO, 1994.

♦ In January 1995, Japan was hit by the latest in a series of 13 major earthquakes since 1923 which have measured between 6.8 and 8.1 on the Richter scale. The city of Kobe suffered a death toll in the thousands and initial estimates of damages and long-term repairs ranged up to $50 billion, according to *The New York Times.*

♦ Excluded from the above figures are the social and health costs of disasters in terms of lost homes, jobs and hopes — the basics of human life.

There is a clear link between the 1994 United Nations–sponsored World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction cited above and the World Summit for Social Development to be convened from 6 to 12 March 1995 in Copenhagen, Denmark. The link is to be found in the negative contribution that disasters make to society's worst ills: migration, poverty, disease and environmental degradation.

People everywhere are vulnerable to natural disasters. While industrialized countries suffer greater economic damage in absolute terms, poor countries are impacted more severely in relative terms: GNP lost due to natural disasters is estimated to be 20 times greater in developing countries than in developed countries. Also, deaths from natural disasters are more frequent in poor countries. Japan, for example, averages 63 deaths per year from natural disasters. Peru, with similar natural hazards and only one sixth the population of Japan, averages 2,900 deaths per year.

The International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR), 1990-2000, is essentially a UN-led campaign to reduce the impact of natural disasters. As the 1994 World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction (a mid-term review of national and international progress toward reducing the impact of disasters) demonstrated, the issues are complex, and the prognosis mixed.

Issues

Awareness: In practice, the connection between disasters and poor development practices is often not made. Instead, natural disasters may be perceived as unalterable "acts of God". Yet disasters are often the trade-off for ignoring environmentally sustainable development practices.

Only gradually are a growing number of emergency management professionals becoming more aware that disasters are often unsolved development problems, a consequence of the choices we make in our everyday lives.

"The real culprit is man", said Dr. Philippe Masure, a member of IDNDR's Scientific and Technical Committee, in an interview with the French newspaper *Le Monde*. "Increased vulnerability to disaster stems largely from environmental degradation and uncontrolled urban growth, exacerbated by demographic pressure and political and institutional gaps."

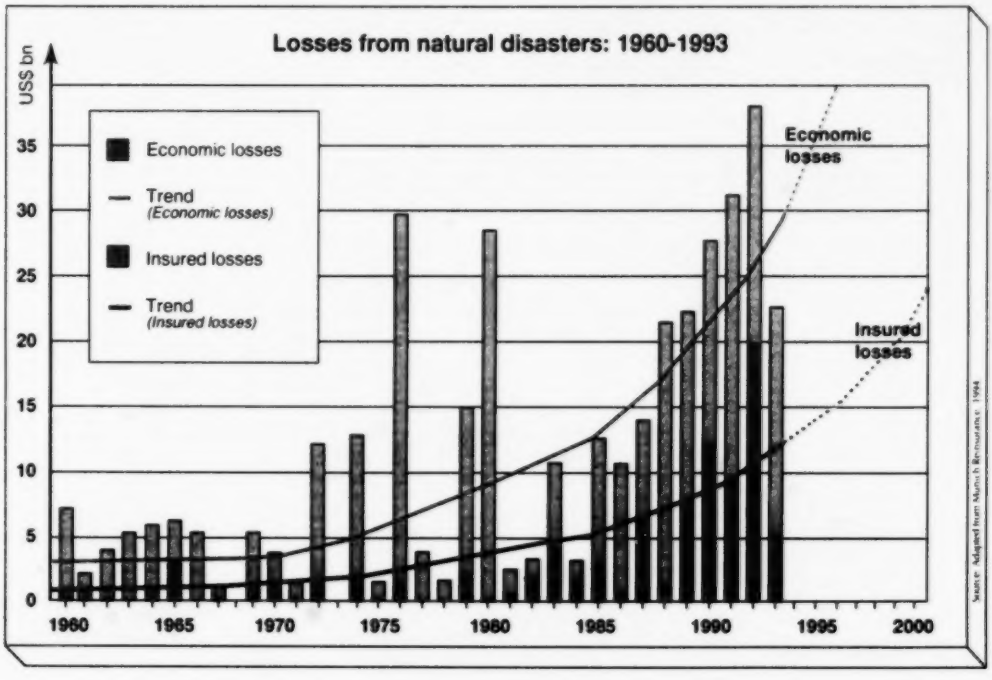
When crises persist despite efforts to resolve them, it is because the answers are not easy. Each year building codes are ignored and zoning laws are overlooked as communities continue to expand into areas prone to earthquakes, landslides, floods, tidal surges, droughts, volcanic eruptions and high winds. Poverty and overpopulation, obvious root causes, need to be addressed if we are to be realistic about disaster reduction.

The *Human Development Report 1994*, an annual publication commissioned by the United Nations Development Programme, maintains that "disasters in developing countries are an integral part of their poverty cycle. Poverty causes disasters. And disasters exacerbate poverty. Only sustainable human development — which increases the security of human beings and of the planet we inhabit — can reduce the frequency and impact of natural disasters."

Commitment: Lack of political commitment to disaster reduction is blocking progress. We have the knowledge to prevent many of these tragedies; we have the means to reduce the amount of damage that disasters cause.

For example, an evacuation plan set up in the 1980s in Papua New Guinea saved thousands of lives when a local volcano erupted in autumn 1994. In another example, studies have shown that by adding only 1 per cent to initial construction costs, "lifeline" community buildings such as hospitals can be made earthquake proof.

But knowledge and technology are not enough to outpace disasters. Warnings must be heard and heeded at the highest political, as well as the lowest grass-roots, level. As a case in point, a famine early-warning system predicted a critical maize shortage due to drought in the Sahel in the late 1980s, but, due to gov-



ernment inaction, international relief and development agencies were slow off the mark in providing food assistance. Many people died before assistance arrived.

Approaches

Establishing a continuum: Today, the dominant approach to disasters is still relief-oriented. But change is in the air. Because of donor fatigue and the relentless rise of both ethnic conflict and natural disasters, there is talk in the international community of a "continuum" between emergency relief and development. In practice, this means that more organizations are undertaking post-disaster rehabilitation and reconstruction with long-term development in mind.

It takes just one more step to build the commitment to implement prevention, mitigation and preparedness measures. While early, targeted responses to natural hazards and socio-economic vulnerabilities are more cost-effective and administratively manageable than large clean-up operations, it is never too late to start. Paradoxically, the post-disaster period is often a good time to launch prevention and preparedness programmes, because public awareness and political will are high.

In the draft Programme of Action for the Social Summit, Governments are requested to "develop long-term strategies and contingency plans for ... disaster warning, assessment, information dissemination and relief, with relief activities evolving quickly into rehabilitation and development activities."

The Asian and Pacific Ministerial Conference (ASPAC) in preparation for the World Summit for Social Development (Manila, 12-18 October 1994) has also called for Governments to "put in place, where they do not already exist, comprehensive disaster preparedness and management plans by the year 2000". Such plans should be based on accurate risk assessments, and should include "measures to ensure earthquake resistant construction, flood plain control, drought mitigation and the avoidance of irreversible soil erosion".

Future Priorities

Prevention: One of the most important results of the World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction was a willingness among a broad range of participants to build a global culture of prevention. As Peter Hansen, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, said, "Resources are shrinking. Disaster threats are growing. The time is right for preventive thinking."

How should we move forward? The Yokohama Conference gave us several signals.

- **Regional:** Regional approaches are important. Even though responsibility for implementing the Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action lies ultimately with local communities supported by their national Governments, the next level should lie with groups of nations sharing common vulnerabilities.
- **Local:** Because local communities bear the brunt of the disaster impact, and hence have the greatest incentive to prevent disasters, more attention must be focused on them.
- **Mainstreaming:** Policy makers must consistently strive to integrate prevention and preparedness into their overall development planning strategies.

The Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action provides guidelines for natural disaster prevention, preparedness and mitigation. In short, the declaration calls for more local training, better information flows and stronger linkages between relief and development programmes.

The World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction drew the attention of policy makers and professionals to the thorny issues blocking implementation of disaster reduction measures. The Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action then charted the way forward. But it is up to countries to take the major initiative to make these realizations into reality.

The World Summit for Social Development should reinforce the political commitment to safeguard the achievements of social development through disaster reduction measures.

For further reading:

Yokohama Message, Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action for a Safer World: Guidelines for Natural Disaster Prevention, Preparedness and Mitigation, World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction, 1994 (A/CONF.172/L.7).

Declaration and Outcome of UN World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction, 23-27 May 1994, Yokohama, Japan.

From Disaster Management to Sustainable Development: How the Public Sector, Private Sector and Voluntary Organizations Can Work Together, World Health Organization, 1994. (WHO/EHA/EPP/Conf. 94.4).

Proceedings of Main Committee Session, World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction, 1994.

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